

# **Towards Distributed Leadership as Standards-Based Practice in British Columbia**

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## **Abstract**

This narrative study of four administrators in British Columbia was an initial investigation of distributed leadership using their provincial leadership standards as an organizing framework. Participants described their understanding and practice of distributed leadership. Three themes were identified: the importance of (a) sharing vision for distributed leadership, (b) leading with character and integrity, and (c) helping others find their leadership voices. Participants' use of formal structural designs for creating and sustaining distributed leadership reflected a set of purposeful administrative practices of distributing leadership, particularly when it pertained to distribution of responsibility for developing instructional leadership capacity in their schools. The practice of establishing distributed leadership was found to be coherent with the development of a sustainable learning community and with the moral stewardship emphasis of the provincial standards.

*Keywords:* distributed leadership, learning community, leadership standards.

## **Précis**

Afin de promouvoir la mise en œuvre du matériel de manipulation dans l'enseignement des mathématiques, ce projet de recherche a permis d'examiner les pratiques d'enseignement de quatre enseignants de mathématiques appliquées de 9<sup>e</sup> année, quant à leur usage du matériel de manipulation dans l'enseignement des mathématiques, et l'impact de ce matériel sur l'apprentissage des élèves. Deux instruments ont servi à la cueillette des données : le questionnaire de l'enseignant et des notes d'observation sur le terrain. Ces méthodes ont été utilisées pour recueillir des données sur l'efficacité avec laquelle les enseignants incorporent le matériel de manipulation dans leurs pratiques d'enseignement, après avoir suivi une formation et pratiqué leurs plans de cours pilote pendant plus de vingt semaines, ainsi que sur l'effet qu'a l'utilisation du matériel de manipulation sur l'apprentissage de leurs élèves. Les résultats ont démontré que les enseignants ont été en mesure d'intégrer dans leurs plans de cours quotidiens le matériel de manipulation qu'ils ont utilisé en pratiquant la prestation d'enseignement des cours modèles. Les enseignants ont indiqué avoir utilisé plus de matériel de manipulation virtuel que de matériel physique, à la suite du projet. L'utilisation du matériel de manipulation dans les classes de mathématiques observées a eu des effets directs sur l'apprentissage des élèves, en particulier, sur les élèves en difficulté. Toutefois, son principal effet fut la création d'un environnement facilitant l'apprentissage des apprenants par le biais de différentes méthodes d'engagement. L'apprentissage des mathématiques s'est fait par voie de partage des connaissances entre les élèves.

We have found an interesting paradox in the current educational leadership literature: The principal is viewed as a key player in establishing the school cultures that support increased leadership capacity; however, the *lone hero* is no longer a sustainable model of leadership in schools (Lambert, 2003; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Mitchell, & Sackney, 2009; Slater, 2008). Our own previous research indicates the principal can be essential in establishing a culture that encourages teachers to take on more leadership roles (Cherkowski, 2004) and that focusing only on the principal's role in a successful change process does not adequately describe the synergy of a learning community (Brown, 2004).

In this narrative study, we begin to resolve the paradox by integrating the language of provincial standards for school leaders' professional growth with administrators' understandings and practices of distributed leadership. Our underlying assumption is that the use of the standards as a professional development tool may provide opportunities for principals to facilitate transitions from the lone hero mindset toward the sense of shared responsibility, a characteristic of a learning community. In other words, the provincial standards were written to describe what competent principals do—and can be extended to describe the behaviours and responsibilities that teachers and paraprofessionals share when leadership in the school is distributed. To begin to understand how these transitions are accomplished, we asked four administrators to describe their distributed leadership practice, and as an organizing framework for our analysis of their narratives we used British Columbia's leadership standards developed by the British Columbia Principal and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA, 2007).

Our findings ground the notion of distributed leadership in local principals' lived experience and affirm the value of a common, standards-based language for articulating and improving practice. Although the participants admitted referencing the standards infrequently, they saw them as guideposts for practice. Analyzing the capacity-building work of experienced principals using the provincial standards framework may benefit prospective leaders as they develop the vision and skills for new roles. As leadership educators, we see the design of the study as a purposeful act of *confluence*—a leadership act that contributes additional energy, resources, or insights to strengthen the flow of existing, positive initiatives. Beyond gathering data on how distributed leadership is achieved in administrative practice, we were interested in investigating how the language of the provincial standards could contribute to distributed leadership practice.

The primary purpose of our research was to gain a clearer understanding of formal leaders' beliefs about distributed leadership. In this initial study, we explored a small group of formal leaders' understanding of distributed leadership through the lens of the BCPVPA leadership standards. We used the standards as an organizing framework because this document provides a consistent frame of reference for administrators in this province. Although not officially adopted by all local school districts, many administrators in this district have participated in a common day of inquiry around the use of the standards as a professional development tool. There is much attention on distributed leadership for school improvement; however, it remains a concept without a clear definition and few descriptive examples. Although findings from this study do not allow us to generalize beyond our small sample, the data provide a glimpse into these formal leaders' lived experience of cultivating distributed leadership in their schools and a platform for further research.

## **Literature Review**

We use Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) sustainable learning community theory as an underpinning theoretical framework for this study. We understand schools as living systems where professional community, shared inquiry, and dialogue allow individual orientations to learning to become characteristic of the school as a whole. Against this backdrop, we present an overview of distributed leadership and a brief history of the BCPVPA standards.

### **Learning Communities**

Theoretically, learning communities reflect an interdisciplinary trend toward a less mechanized and a more ecological ontology. Practically, for a school to function as a learning community, the adults in the school need to develop a culture of interdependence. The principal is a key, though not solitary, actor in shifting school culture toward a professional learning community (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina, 2007). Sustainable changes in schools require formal leaders to develop leadership capacity at many levels of the school (Fullan, 2002; Lambert, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009) and to engage in continuous learning in their own work (Elmore, 2000). Inherent in the learning community literature is the assumption of a leader-rich environment, where teacher leaders also exercise influence.

Emerging out of the learning organization metaphor (Senge, 1990), the learning community model for school organization has evolved as a more organic and ecological model for organizing schools (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009). Several characteristics underpin the learning community model. Learning communities are built around shared visions, values, and goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000), have a collaborative work culture (Barth, 1990; Hargreaves, 2003), are places where collective learning and shared understanding exist (Huffman & Hipp, 2003), focus on reflective practice, and are sustained through creating environments that are rich in leaders at all levels of the school (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2005).

## **Distributed Leadership**

There is a robust body of scholarly literature on the subject of distributed leadership. However, there is little agreement on a working definition. For example, Spillane et al.'s (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, 2009; Spillane, Camburn, & Paraeja, 2009; Spillane, Halver-son, & Diamond 2004; Spillane, & Orlina, 2005) work focuses on the role of the principal in distributed leadership. His research in schools in Chicago has resulted in a strong theoretical foundation for distributed educational leadership. He defined this leadership as "practice distributed over leaders, followers and their situation and incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 20). This model of distributed leadership centres on the social context and the importance of the inter-relationships within the school.

The social context of distributed leadership is an important aspect in research. For example, Gronn's (2000, 2002) initial research on distributed leadership reflects the social context of Spillane's definition but focuses on the emergent properties of the group enacted by individuals working together. Recognizing the complexity of the role of school leaders and the challenge of attributing only one form of leadership to any given situation, he suggested a hybrid model of leadership that combines a variety of leadership distributions (Gronn, 2009). His notion of hybrid leadership recognizes the likelihood of there being both individual and shared leadership emerging at various times in organizations.

Extensive research on distributed leadership in schools in Britain and Canada illuminates the importance of the distribution pattern within organizations (cf., Harris, Leithwood, Day, Hopkins, & Sammons, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Leithwood, et al. (2007) found that distribution of leadership that is deliberately aligned and spontaneously aligned encourages positive results, whereas spontaneous misalignment and anarchic misalignment can generate negative organizational outcomes in schools.

Research in New Zealand shifted the focus of distributed leadership and teacher leadership to student achievement (Robinson, 2006, 2008). Robinson's investigation into extant research and literature on distributed leadership revealed little evidence of impact on student achievement. Thus, she framed her research to investigate this connection. She described how a focus on teacher learning and development, such as may occur more readily in the context of distributed leadership, can lead to improved student achievement.

Although there are studies from perspectives other than those in formal leadership roles, the principal still plays a leading role in most of the research on distributed leadership. In contrast, Lieberman and Miller (2004) have proposed that teacher leaders have a unique role to play in reshaping school culture from individualism to professional community. Examining the ways teacher leaders impact organizational change and student achievement is becoming an important component of research on school improvement (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Timperley, 2005). Muijs and Harris (2006) carried out research on distributed leadership from the point of view of teachers in Britain and determined that teacher leadership is often fluid and emergent, pointing again to the importance of context.

Sustainability of reform efforts has been an important focus for research on distributed leadership (Copland, 2003; Davies, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). System reform and distributed leadership (Fullan, 2006, 2009), the use of inquiry (Copland, 2003), as well as district attitudes towards teacher leadership (Firestone & Martinez, 2007), have shown promising results for distributed leadership on school improvement. The learning community model resonates with the importance of a leader-rich environment for sustainable improvement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009).

## **BCPVPA Leadership Standards**

British Columbia, like other jurisdictions, is experiencing an increasing public demand for school improvement to support student achievement, just as a growing body of research affirms administrative leadership as a key ingredient in school improvement. Against this backdrop, the *Leadership Standards for Principals and Vice-Principals in British Colum-*

*bia* were developed collaboratively and disseminated in March 2007 (BCPVPA, 2007). The four organizing categories, or domains, of these standards —Moral Stewardship, Instructional Leadership, Organizational Capacity, and Relationships—were generated by practising administrators as the touchstones of their profession and are the key elements of their daily practice. Each of the nine standards within these four domains is designed to support the learning and achievement of all students.

As a professional development tool, the leadership standards show promise for engaging formal leaders in reflective inquiry into how they are developing and sustaining learning communities in the schools in this province. Generally, the standards have been informally adopted in schools in British Columbia, but we have found no research exploring the extent to which these standards are influencing administrators' practices in schools. In a time of increasing pressure for sustained school improvement with varying levels of support (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009), understanding how this professional development tool might contribute to creating greater leadership capacity in schools is an important avenue of research.

We have found that the image of healthy schools as learning communities resonates throughout the BC leadership standards. Moral stewardship is one of the four domains of this model and is at the centre of the model of concentric circles that represent the other three domains: organizational capacity, instructional leadership, and an emphasis on self-knowledge and relationships. Each of the nine standards within these four domains is designed to support the learning and achievement of all students. The standards are intended as a professional development tool, not an evaluative tool. As will be described, the participants tended to see the standards as a guide for learning and development, and indicated that they refer to the standards as they deem appropriate within their practice. We used the standards as an organizing framework to explore the extent to which these school leaders understand and enact distributed leadership in their daily practice.

## **Method**

In order to better understand how formal, or administrative, leaders experience distributed leadership in their schools, and to gain insight into the role of BCPVPA leadership standards in understanding this experience, we designed a qualitative narrative inquiry in

one school district in British Columbia. Narrative inquiry was chosen as an appropriate method for gaining a deep and rich understanding of the leaders' experiences of distributed leadership and as a way of making sense of the parts in relation to the whole (Clan-dinin & Connelly, 1994; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). Through in-depth interviews, we were able to access the stories of distributed leadership in a small number of schools. Framed within our learning community perspective, we used the leadership standards as an organizer for conversations and a framework for analysis.

Our findings for this study are drawn from four formal leaders recruited from the participating school district. An initial letter of introduction was sent to all principals and vice-principals in the district. We received a very small response to the invitation to participate. Due to timelines for research and based on the nature of this study as our initial inquiry into the topic, we chose to proceed. The sample is a mix of male and female, elementary and secondary school administrators.

Data were collected through two in-depth interviews with each participant. The conversations began with a discussion of the formal leaders' understanding of and experiences with distributed leadership through the lens of the British Columbia leadership standards (BCPVPA, 2007). We invited participants to share their understanding of the standards, how they came to these understandings, and how they experience the standards in relation to distributed leadership. We then invited participants to share their stories of how they see distributed leadership enacted within their schools.

All conversations were conducted face-to-face, tape recorded with permission, and transcribed word for word. Interviews lasted about 90 minutes. The transcribed interviews were analyzed as an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data as outlined in research for conducting qualitative, interpretive research (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Transcripts were read and coded at an individual level, and then analyzed and coded at a level of comparison. We provided conclusions to participants for their validation and further contributions.

## **Findings**

In the following section we elaborate the findings using the four domains of the leadership standards. We identified three themes linked to the Moral Stewardship and Relational



Leadership domains: the importance of (a) a shared vision for distributed leadership, (b) leading with character and integrity, and (c) helping others find their leadership voices. We found that the Organizational Leadership domain related to participants' use of formal structural designs for creating and sustaining distributed leadership, particularly when it pertained to distribution of responsibility within the domain of Instructional Leadership.

## **Moral Stewardship Domain**

### **The Importance of Creating and Sustaining a Shared Vision**

Moral stewardship is at the core of the standards document and encompasses the idea of creating and sustaining a shared vision in the school—an idea of paramount importance for the leaders in this study. The participants understood shared vision as an essential tool for developing leadership and instructional capacity in their schools. They described how they tried to craft and sustain a compelling vision that became shared through the process of deriving goals in line with the vision. This notion of creating and sustaining a shared vision is central to establishing learning communities in schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2009; Stoll & Louis, 2007).

As described by the leaders in this study, the shared vision became an important tool that allowed the principal to step away from being the sole director of a large portion of the leadership in the school because a strong vision developed by the teachers and principal provided the parameters within which learning community members could be autonomous and innovative. They believed that because they had put in the time and hard work of crafting and communicating a strong vision within the school that it became the guidepost for the teachers and freed the formal leader from serving as gatekeeper for all the school initiatives. One principal recognized the importance of autonomy and self-direction in motivation for change and sustaining change (Pink, 2010) through building leadership capacity. He credited the school's strong and compelling shared vision for a staff that was likely to excel beyond a ceiling he might impose if he had to continuously dictate the parameters of acceptability for each initiative.

Although the principal was often responsible for crafting and communicating the initial vision, the participants noticed that teachers eventually took on the ownership of the vision as long as it spoke to their core beliefs about what was important in the school.

One principal said, “If it’s a shared vision, they’ll enforce it themselves. It’ll be done by the colleagues. They’ll say, ‘No, no, we made a decision and we’re not going that way.’” He recognized that the shared vision created a community contract that both he and the teachers have agreed upon. He explained:

Having those goals and having those conversations and having that professional learning as part of the structure and part of the learning here leads to building capacity. So, it’s all part of the distributed leadership. That is, it’s built on all of that, our values and goals and beliefs.

Although developing a shared vision is an important criterion in the standards and in the literature on learning communities, there is a wide spectrum of understanding around the notion of “shared.” For example, one of the administrators in this study consistently strove to convince her teachers and staff of her vision for teaching and learning in the school. In this way, she reported that she has been able to shift the beliefs in the school toward a more positive and effective philosophy for all the students. Although her vision was not necessarily shared, it became a shared vision through her conviction in establishing this philosophy in the school. She explained:

It did rub off on people, I think. The more I talked to people about my vision for education, the more I noticed that more individuals in the organization started to talk that same talk and to share experiences that were in alignment with that vision . . . it became the basis of really great discussion. So, from that, our school goals were collaboratively developed.

Another principal talked about using the shared vision as a component of professional relationships. He described how he has invested so much time in establishing a shared vision and ensuring that he consistently refers to the goals and the vision, that the teachers know that decisions he makes are not about the particular initiative brought forward or about the teacher. Rather, it is about the fit with the school vision and goals. In his experience, he has recognized the importance of establishing a shared vision that has been crafted and agreed upon by the members of the staff, and then he has ensured that goals from the vision are at the forefront of every decision that he and his teachers make. He feels that this communal contract binds them in a positive way as professionals working together to achieve the agreed-upon goals.

## **The Importance of Leading with Character and Integrity**

Modelling moral leadership was a central message in each of these stories of distributed leadership and reflects the finding of Leithwood et al. (2007) that leaders must work to develop a culture of trust and respect in order to engender successful distributed leadership. The administrators in this study described how they aimed to model strong character, integrity, and moral courage in their leadership, since they demonstrated they were serving the students and the teachers above all personal need and personal interest. One principal said,

I guess I understand that leadership can't be about looking like you're in it for your ego. It can't be about just me. . . . As long as it fits within the parameters of what we're doing as a school, I'm going to support the hell out of you. It's got nothing to do with me. If that's true and if people believe that, you're going to get them to go far. If they start to sense that I'm using them for something, for my own good, it won't [work], you know what I mean?

The participants were clear about the importance of the moral leadership domain, at the centre of the standards, is also the heart of their practice. They believed they were successful in distributing leadership and engaging teachers in leading initiatives because they were modelling a level of moral leadership that inspired others to join them.

## **Relational Leadership Domain**

### **The Importance of Helping Others to Find Their Leadership Voice**

The second theme that emerged from the data reflects the importance of helping others to find their own way to be leaders or helping others to find their leadership voice (Covey, 2004). This theme relates to the relationships domain of the standards and reflects the importance of the principal's role in finding ways to develop the intrapersonal capacity—the relationships among and between colleagues—of the learning community (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

In talking about the ways the principals assigned their staff, developed their teams, and distributed leadership, the principals asserted that an important part of their role was understanding the different personal and professional capacities of the teachers

in the school and realizing when teachers needed to be guided to finding their own leadership voice. These administrators believed that the informal leadership in their school was best developed through helping their staff recognize their strengths and find ways to develop their leadership. They knew this could only be done through building respectful relationships within the school. For example, one leader noted that he had helped a teacher to develop his leadership capacity for generating more positive influence in the school. He described a recent conversation:

I went two days ago and said [to one of my teachers], “Look, you’re the most outspoken person against this. There’s a training session on this next week. If you want to be outspoken, there’s the place to do it.” And he goes, “Yeah, you’re right. Sign me up.” . . . I offered him the chance to speak up.

This principal admitted that he was unsure about how this conversation might go, but that he knew he had built a solid, professional relationship with this teacher so he was willing to take the risk. The principal shared how the mutually respectful relationship provided the trust and safety for both of them to take risks while they worked together to build this teacher’s leadership capacity.

Providing teachers with time to develop as leaders in areas in which they feel comfortable helped one principal provide a safe way for teachers to develop their leadership voice in new ways as they took on more challenging leadership roles. She explained how she had noticed that

as they sign up [for] more and more to do, say, sports, because that’s their aptitude, they are more likely to sign up for something in instructional leadership the next year. Because they have demonstrated . . . leadership in roles in which they feel comfortable, they are more likely to take risks the following year in those instructional leadership roles.

The principal in this school created a safe space for teachers to develop their leadership voice.

The importance of relationships was evident in how the participants described why they monitored for over-distribution of leadership, whether in the school or within the district. The principals explained how they worry about their teachers being too involved in too many initiatives at the district level and how they intentionally craft limits

for how many extra committees and responsibilities are expected of their staff. One principal talked about the challenge of balancing the demands from the district with the needs within the schools. She shared:

I'm forever walking a very fine line with the staff, protecting, for lack of a better word, protecting their health, their time, their well-being, and trying to figure out what's best for the district and what's best for the school. And if there's some overlap, then we're not going to go to that [for the district]. And that's fine. Giving permission to not go is okay.

The participants talked about how they often volunteered to take on more than their share of the demands for the district as a way of protecting the teachers' time for work on teaching and learning. None of the participants talked about ways that they ensured that their own plates do not become overloaded as they aim to keep the balance for their staff. Exploring the personal demands of a shift toward distributed leadership on administrators and the ways they are able to nourish their own energy and find support through a capacity-building period is an area for further study.

## **Organizational Leadership Domain**

### **Distributed Leadership by Design**

Viewed through the lens of the leadership standards, the formal leaders in this study have developed organizational capacity and aim to sustain it with the use of structures and mindsets that support teacher leadership in their schools. While aiming to support teacher leaders emotionally, the principals said they wanted to ensure that teachers were given the space and power to move the initiatives forward on their own. They described using formal structures, such as staff meetings, and informal structures, such as the "chin wag" sessions and planning mindsets. These structures provided opportunities for the administrators to create an environment not only where leadership opportunities can be shared and where leadership can be distributed but also where it can emerge more organically. These structural initiatives reflect Leithwood et al.'s (2007) findings that the success of distributed leadership rests on careful planning and coordination.

One structure that was purposefully implemented by the principals in this study was the use of formal meetings for supporting teacher leadership. During these times, teacher leaders were supported by their administrator as they moved forward in the lead of their initiatives. This served both to provide support for each teacher and also to model to others how teacher leadership is safe in this environment. One principal described how he uses weekly information meetings to inform staff of upcoming activities and to provide a place for teachers to talk about their own initiatives. When a teacher recently asked him to agree to an initiative that he recognized would elicit conflicting messages from various teachers, he presented the teacher with an opportunity to present her case at the staff meeting. In describing why the principal decided to have the teacher bring the initiative to her colleagues in this venue, rather than making a unilateral decision, he said, “I run our monthly meetings. This [weekly meeting] will be just [the teacher] getting up, and I’ll be right there with her asking everyone what we think we should do.” The structure that the principal created—the weekly information meeting—provided an opportunity for the teacher to engage in a leadership role that was publicly supported by the principal. The principal did not ensure that the teacher would gain staff support to be successful with her bid, but he did ensure that she was supported as she put her case forward to colleagues. This support appeared to contribute to the level of trust that teachers then showed their administrator.

The participants mentioned that they have created, and strive to protect, collaborative time for their teachers within the school day. They believe that part of the success of distributed leadership in their schools rests on the formal structures and meetings that they have established to allow teachers to engage in more purposeful collaboration. One of the structures used to develop this instructional leadership capacity is a formal professional learning community meeting (PLC). These collaborative meetings are scheduled in advance and teacher attendance is assured through the administrator’s responsibility for alternative programming for the students during this time. The participants believed that this demonstrated that collaboration and distributed instructional leadership are valued by protecting collaborative time within the school day.

Another interesting structure described by one of the principals was the formally established but informally run instructional leadership showcase session that she called a “chin wag.” These sessions are put on by teachers who have been invited by the principal, based on observed strengths in instructional leadership, to carry out information sessions

during a lunch hour with anyone interested in attending. The principal observed that the teachers had begun to take ownership for identifying instructional strengths and had suggested that teachers highlight these during these informal sessions. She explained:

What I've noticed . . . is that [the teachers] are keeping it going and tapping on shoulders and [asking] some of the new teachers if they might want some help in developing a chin wag. So, they're really taking it over.

One principal described the success he has had using a forward-planning mindset and the metaphor of using "the bank" in relation to decisions and planning issues. He explained that administrators must make immediate decisions and do not always have the option of taking decisions to their teachers for shared deliberation and discussion. He believes that his general tendency toward engaging teachers in shared decision making on most issues provides him a level of security that he can use to withdraw from the bank when he has to make immediate decisions. He said,

[I can] dip into the bank a bit. Now you can't do that that often, but unfortunately, in the world we live in, we get [a lot] thrown at [us], and you have to act right now . . . and when they feel like they've been a part of the [ongoing] decision making, . . . if they see it the other way [that I've acted without consultation], they know I [didn't] have any choice.

This principal has established a precedent for shared decision making that pays dividends for those times when he is obliged to act unilaterally.

## **Instructional Leadership Domain**

### **Student Learning Drives Distribution**

A common message from the participants was that they tried to put student learning at the heart of their leadership. One principal mentioned that he believed this was the biggest contribution of the standards, that it brought greater attention to the importance of instructional leadership in school leadership as he used the document for professional growth. He explained that,

Traditionally, high school leadership has been very management heavy, and curricular leadership, I don't even know if it was talked about. Now, it's constantly talked about. And, we're constantly talking about student time. You look at that [standards document] and it gives you a good guiding post.

The participants described the importance they placed on being in the classrooms and checking in with students about their learning. For all, this was an important and enjoyable part of their day. They explained how they used these visits to keep current with what was happening in their schools, to model the value of learning, and to be able to talk to their teachers about the presence or absence of important learning in their classrooms. They recognized that their classroom visits meant they would have to do their "deskwork" in the evenings, but this did not deter them from their goal of being informed of and involved with the learning that was happening in their classrooms.

Distributed leadership and instructional leadership were closely linked for these participants. For example, one participant described how instructional leadership is about how to keep the teaching experts in the building plugged in to the resources they need to shine in the classroom. He explained,

I'm an expert in very few things at the school, but I can get the resources to facilitate it . . . And what happens if I cut off the power to the experts in the school? I can get people to comply on paper . . . And I think that's what has happened traditionally in a lot of schools, is you get compliance . . . But what's really happening in the classroom?

Similarly, instructional leadership was described as "helping the team to get moving and keep momentum." For these administrators, instructional leadership in the classroom hinged on administration's recognition of supporting teacher expertise, motivating teachers to come together and move forward as a team, and providing necessary resources. In these cases, we noticed that distributed leadership blended with instructional leadership, with teachers moving in and out of leadership roles as instructional leaders. This is similar to Gronn's (2009) suggestion of a hybrid leadership model that emerges in response to the needs and social contexts of the situation at hand.

The experiences drawn from these participants seem to indicate that distribution of instructional leadership tended to fall within two of the categories described by Spill-



ane et al.'s (2009) recent research: *instructional and curriculum tasks* and *administrative tasks*. Understanding how and why principals make decisions about distributing instructional leadership, to whom, for how long, and in what ways, as well as the resulting implications for establishing strong learning cultures in schools, are interesting avenues for continued research.

Finally, participants described instructional leadership as knowing how to let others make mistakes as they learn. One principal described how this is often difficult in public schools, where teachers and school leaders are often at the scrutiny of the public they are serving. He shared his concern:

I sometimes worry about education in the public sector. Leaders, administrators feel they have to . . . everything has to be perfect. And you can't allow people to kind of bumble their way around because everything has to be perfect in the public. You know what I mean by that?

He was concerned about the paradox of letting teachers make mistakes and fumble around with new ideas in order to learn and soar as instructional leaders, while also needing to maintain an image of what he calls "perfection" under the scrutiny that comes with being a publicly funded institution. His observation reveals a struggle to allow for messiness within the confines of the expectations he felt on him and for the teachers in the school. An interesting reflection would examine whether these expectations were, in fact, externally imposed or constructed internally as a result of prior experience or personal fears. Perhaps the reflection marks either an ongoing and incomplete transition, for this principal, from the role expectations in a bureaucratic system and those of a learning community or the tension between trying to generate a learning community culture while working within a bureaucratic system.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The formal leaders in this small study provided rich descriptions of their experience of distributed leadership in their daily work. This qualitative data gives texture to the empirical evidence supporting distributed leadership as an educational leadership model. Their experiences resonated with current research that suggests that distributed leadership can

be successful when purposefully structured and aligned with shared visions and goals (Leithwood et al., 2007). Moreover, Gronn's (2009) discussion of distributed leadership as a hybrid model was reflected in how these principals shifted between taking personal ownership of leadership, working with pairs of leaders, or giving the leadership to others through lateral leadership structures, based on the needs of the situation. For example, although the principal who organized the "chin wag" was purposeful about leading this empowering structure, the ownership of the routine that emerged on the part of the teachers was spontaneous.

Beyond the different types of distributed leadership are different attitudes and beliefs about distributed leadership. Principals seem to be pivotal in creating conditions for successful distributed leadership to occur in schools, and so formal leaders need to understand that they have a direct impact in encouraging a culture of distributed leadership in their schools. Like the participants in this study, school principals may move purposefully toward a distributed model of leadership, particularly instructional leadership, in order to support teacher development and thus indirectly support student learning. For principals who wish to learn from our participants, a reflective approach will include questions about the anticipated benefits of distributed leadership, how opportunities for informal leadership can be built into structured processes, and what impact this way of leading has on teachers and on the school culture as a whole. Although the research literature does not provide compelling evidence that distributed leadership increases student learning, it is an increasingly common assumption that this effect occurs indirectly as more adults in the school learn together to teach more effectively. The principals who were our participants appeared to subscribe to this belief and to act accordingly.

The four principals who told us the story of their distributed leadership shared their efforts to model a strong belief in the importance of student learning and then create conditions for teachers to excel as instructional leaders throughout the school. One interesting finding was the tension between providing opportunities for teachers to try out new ideas and preserving public confidence. Messages from the government in this province express a desire for schools to become sites of greater innovation for improving learning experiences for all children. Researchers need to learn more about the internal struggles, dilemmas, and challenges faced by administrators and teachers as they shift between roles and expectations within bureaucratic systems and learning community cultures. We suggest that there is a need to research the impact of failure—an inherent component in

innovation—on the teachers and school leaders who must answer to the public, parents, and community members in a very personal way.

Viewed through the lens of the BCPVPA leadership standards, distributed leadership has much to do with creating and sustaining a shared vision and modelling moral leadership, establishing relationships in which teachers' instructional and leadership skills can be showcased and weaknesses can be strengthened in a supportive way, ensuring teachers are not over-burdened with too many distributed tasks, and establishing formal structures in which informal leadership can flourish. The idea that the standards are used as guideposts for professional growth was a consistent message from the participants. Further exploration of the use of the standards as a professional development tool could provide more insight into the ways in which school-based administrators are using the document to guide their own professional development.

The distributed leadership research also showed how the BCPVPA leadership standards provide a novel way of accessing principals' stories and experiences of distributed leadership. From the experience of this sample, the standards appear to be a useful tool for providing consistent language and focus among a group of administrators in this district for establishing professional growth plans, which they refer to throughout the year. More research would be helpful to understand the extent to which this is the case throughout the district and the province. A comparison with the use of leadership standards in other provinces as a professional development tool is an area we suggest for future research.

The leadership experiences described in this paper support Harris's (2008) assumption that formal leaders are often the gatekeepers for distributed leadership in schools. Although the principals in this study provided a rather positive picture of the gate-keeping function, we are aware of the missing piece of understanding—the teachers' perspectives. Although Harris assumed vertical and lateral leadership to be closely aligned in distributed leadership, we wonder whether those in formal leadership roles are necessarily the most influential in terms of building leadership capacity in schools. The missing piece is an understanding of teachers' beliefs about and experiences with distributed leadership, and although Blasé and Blasé (1998) have defined instructional leadership through the positive experiences of teachers, we believe that teachers' perspectives on bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), or distributed leadership gone wrong, must also be reported. For example, a recently completed doctoral study (Lau, 2012) provided

the poignant narratives of teacher leaders whose initiatives failed, possibly due to lack of administrative support, as well stories of successfully distributed leadership. A deeper understanding of the complexities of distributed leadership requires the perspectives of teachers as well as administrators.

However, we believe our study of this topic has emphasized the compatibility of learning community development and distributed leadership, particularly in administrative practice, and emphasized the value of provincial leadership standards as an organizing framework and source of common language. Further, the standards, designed to inform and support administrator learning, do not preclude a distributed approach to leadership. This study has contributed specific aspects of capacity building that may inform beginning administrators as well as leadership educators, including building a shared vision of distributed leadership, leading with character and integrity, and enabling others to develop their own leadership potential. Above all, this study has confirmed our belief in attending to the moral imperative outlined in our provincial standards, aligned with learning community thinking: an essential duty of leaders, formal or informal, is to cultivate the personal capacity of all colleagues as well as the success of all students.

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